

Australian Literature and the New Empiricism: A response to Paul Eggert, “Australian Classics and the Price of Books”

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I welcome Paul Eggert’s paper because it does something that I think needs to be done now, and that *is* being done by an increasing number of Australian literature scholars. In the 1980s and 1990s, Australian literary criticism was dominated by theoretically-driven modes of textual interpretation: post-structuralism, feminism, postcolonialism, and so on. While some theoretical modes, such as psychoanalysis, are enjoying a come-back, there is also strong evidence of a “post-theoretical” or “new empirical” turn, which drives back over the familiar ground of literary history to ask new, fact-driven questions. This is partly bound up with the availability of powerful new data sets and information technologies, but it also derives, in particular, from the research methods associated with the internationally established disciplines of book and publishing history. There is a common move here: to interrogate the received findings about a period in literary history that theoretically-driven modes of close reading have produced in the past. This is done by subjecting the period to what Franco Moretti calls “distant reading” and William St Clair calls “the political economy of reading”, asking what books were actually available at the time, who published them, how much they cost, how and where they were distributed, and what kinds of readers bought them. What do the answers to these questions tell us about the period and the ways its literature has been interpreted by successive generations?

I’m most familiar with this new empiricism through the work of St Clair, author of *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004). St Clair’s work is especially compelling because he not only uses the new empiricism but also provides a cogent argument for it. In his 2005 John Coffin Memorial Lecture, “The Political Economy of Reading”, St Clair characterises two forms of literary history which he calls the “parade of authors” and the “parliament of texts” (3). In the parade of authors, the past is represented by

great names—Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth—while in the parliament of texts, the past is organised as a series of connections between great books. These approaches are both based upon a critical or hermeneutic approach to texts that is not historical, but *ideological*—both he and Eggert use that word. In both cases, literary history is established through close reading by the sovereign critic who sits in a “commentator’s box” high above the parade of texts (3). What these approaches fail to do, St Clair argues, is seek information from *outside* those texts about what books were actually read and by whom. Yet “any study of the consequences of the reading of the past ought to consider the books that were actually read, not some modern selection” (4).

As a test case, St Clair examines the so-called “The Age of Wordsworth”. He points out that Wordsworth’s books were printed in editions of only 500 to 1000 copies, which were soon remaindered. How, he asks, could romanticism have shaped the minds of 10 to 15 million people? And what were they actually reading? By researching the price and distribution of books, St Clair found that reading is subject to series of time lags and is highly stratified according to social class. In the Age of Wordsworth, only a handful of people could afford to read new books. A large constituency of the middle class read works produced two or more generations earlier: Shakespeare, Johnson, Gibbon and Adam Smith. And the poor read books originally published several hundred years earlier and now available in cheap editions: the English bible, almanacs, chapbook abridgements of medieval romances.

Although Eggert doesn’t refer to St Clair, he does use the now established methods of book and publishing history. In his paper, he has tried to do for the Australian 1890s what St Clair does for the English 1790s. Eggert’s last sentence is this: “The wider lesson is that the ideological or discursive explanation of literary-cultural shifts cannot safely operate as a truth-telling vector in an empirical vacuum” (150). The particular ideological or discursive explanation Eggert is interested in is the feminist revision of the canon of Australian literature that began in the 1970s and intensified in the 1980s and 1990s. One of its main texts was Susan Sheridan’s 1985 article, “‘Temper, Romantic; Bias, Offensively Feminine’: Australian Women Writers and Literary Nationalism”. Sheridan argues that women novelists like Cambridge, Praed and Tasma, once popular and relatively widely available, were downgraded by critics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in favour of Kingsley, Boldrewood, Clarke and Furphy, because the former wrote about domestic subjects and preferred the mode of romance.

Eggert's move, following the techniques of book history, is to look again at this moment of canon formation in the light of hard data about the availability of books. What he finds is that the women novelists chose the wrong publishers, who did not have the market penetration of houses like Macmillan (which published Boldrewood), and also that they were "one or two years too late" (149)—by the 1890s the canon had already formed on the basis of widely available books by Kingsley and Boldrewood. Eggert concludes that information about books and the marketplace may be more important than "ideological and discursive explanation[s]" (150) to understand why some books become classics and others do not—or at least that ideological and discursive explanations are not enough without hard information about the availability of books. Where St Clair's position is more polemical, Eggert acknowledges both methods of explanation, and asks how they might work together.

How important is availability in the light of what Raymond Williams calls the "selective tradition", which works through ideological and aesthetic choices? Eggert says that the problem was "to explain why fine novels written by Australian women writers of the 1880s and 1890s [. . .] were overlooked by critics [such as Byrne], and indeed virtually forgotten, as a consensus about the classics of Australian literature began to settle down during the 1920s and 1930s" (132). But Sheridan did not say they were "forgotten" or "overlooked"; rather, she said that judgements were made by a series of critics about their subject matter and style. In any event, "forgetting" and "overlooking" are not the same thing as unavailability or a simple absence of books. They are part of the active, not passive, process of social memory that Williams calls the "selective tradition". My impression is that Sheridan is correct, not only about the 1890s, but also about the 1920s and 1930s, when Eggert says the canon was bedded down. Nettie Palmer's *Modern Australian Literature* (1924) puts forward a strong canon based on Furphy as "the father of the Australian novel". She was not unaware of the earlier women writers; she discusses them in some detail, especially Spence and Praed, but she also makes negative judgements about them, mainly because of her literary nationalism. And the other women novelists Eggert mentions, like Louisa Atkinson and Mary Theresa Vidal, were not simply "forgotten": they were strongly criticised by their contemporaries for aesthetic reasons, such as their excessive moralising, and so fell out of fashion. Even the matter of Kingsley and Boldrewood's canonisation is not straightforward. By then, both their reputations had begun the slow decline that would continue in the twentieth century, as foreshadowed by Furphy's scathing criticisms of Kingsley's romanticism.

The new empiricism provides a knowledge of the political economy of reading that was formerly lacking. But we also need to know how the selective tradition worked. Williams understood this as an interaction between ideological and discursive levels on the one hand, and material circumstances on the other. The selective tradition works by a series of active ideological and discursive interventions on the material. This means that while the ideological or discursive explanation cannot safely operate in an “empirical vacuum” (150) as Eggert rightly argues, at the same time data about the availability of texts in a certain period is meaningless unless we understand the selective tradition. This requires an historically informed account of the social acts of remembering and forgetting.

St Clair’s central contention is that “any study of the consequences of the reading of the past ought to consider the books that were actually read, not some modern selection” (4). Has Eggert done this? And if not, why not? He has used the empirical method to question Sheridan’s argument about the formation of the Australian literature canon—Praed versus Boldrewood. But both are versions of the parade of authors. Both are modern selections. Here is a series of binary oppositions that Eggert has inverted but not displaced: the feminist canon and the book history canon; the ideological and the empirical. Both he and Sheridan argue within the cultural nationalist paradigm that formed the canonical debates in the 1890s, in the 1920s and in the 1950s. Eggert has asked: what *Australian* books were people reading? He has not asked: what *books* were people reading? To do so would mean understanding the relation between Australian and non-Australian books, and the practices by which they were connected in “the reading nation”.

There are several examples of Australian critics and literary historians making this more radical move. In her recent article, “Not Reading the 1890s”, Elizabeth Webby finds that what people were reading in the 1890s was neither Praed nor Boldrewood, but Dickens and Trollope, as of course they always had done. And Tim Dolin, in a remarkable essay, “First Steps Toward a History of the Mid-Victorian Novel in Colonial Australia”, has shown how we can look at the Australian reception of canonical Victorian novels like Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, which were read for their thematic associations with contemporary Australian books, such as the novels of Catherine Helen Spence. Finally, David Carter’s work on “middlebrow” writing demonstrates that Australian criticism has largely failed to explore the relationship between Australian literature and the wider economy of the reading nation. In the 1890s, he suggests, even in the pages of the *Bulletin*, “editors and reviewers certainly encouraged Australian books wherever they could, but there is little

sense of opposition between English and Australian” texts (184). The reading of *Australian literature* is bound up with broader questions about reading *literature in Australia*. To put this another way, we probably will not fully understand Australian literature until it is seen as part of the broader political economy of literature in Australia.

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